

excerpts from 'Answers from the Heart'

by Thich Nhat Hanh

"We don't need to wait for some other person to be the change we want to see in the world."



Q. What is Buddhism's connection to social justice, peace, and peacemaking?

A. In Vietnam we started a movement that we called "engaged Buddhism." We wanted Buddhism to be present in every walk of life--not just in the temple, but also in society, in our schools, our families, our workplaces, even in politics and the military. Compassion and understanding should be present everywhere.

There are many of us who are eager to work for peace, but we don't have peace within. Angrily we shout for peace, and angrily we shout at the people who, like us, are also for peace. Even people and groups dedicated to peacemaking sometimes fight amongst themselves. If there is no peace in our hearts, there can be no harmony among the peace workers. And if there is no harmony, there is no hope. If we're divided, if we're in despair, we can't serve; we can't do anything. Peace must begin with ourselves: with the practice of sitting quietly, walking mindfully, taking care of our body, releasing the tension in our body and in our feelings. That is why the practice of being peace is at the foundation of the practice of doing peace. Being peace comes first. Doing peace is something that comes from that foundation.

The moment when you sit down and begin to breathe in, calming your mind and your body, peace has become a reality. That kind of breathing is like praying. When there is the element of peace in you, you can connect with other people, and you can help others to be peaceful like you. Together you become a body of peace, the Sangha body of peace. The practice can bring peace to us right away; and when you're more peaceful, more pleasant, you can be more effective in contacting other people and inviting them to join in the work of peacemaking. Since you're peaceful and you know how to look peacefully, speak peacefully, and react peacefully, you can persuade many people to join you in the work of promoting peace and reconciliation.

You can't have peace just by sitting down and negotiating or making plans. You have to learn to breathe in and out, to calm yourself, and you have to be able to help the other person to do like you. If there's no element of peace in you and in the other person, none of your activities can be described as genuine acts of peacemaking.

We have to practice peace in our corporations, our cities, and our schools. Schoolteachers have to practice peace, and teach their students how to practice peace. The president of a country or the head of a political party must practice peace, must pray for peace in his body and mind before he can be effective in asking other prime ministers and heads of state to join him in making peace. Ideally each peace conference would begin with walking meditation and sitting meditation. And someone would be there to guide the total relaxation in order to remove tension, anger, and fear in body and mind. That is bringing the spiritual dimension into our political and social life; that is engaged Buddhism.

Q. Many of us activists are dedicated to the cause of peace, but we see so little progress we get discouraged. How can we avoid burnout?

A. We have to know our limits. We have to organize our lives in such a way that we can continue to get the nourishment and healing that we need. The solution is in your community. If you work with a community that practices together, a Sangha, you receive the collective energy of support. When you begin to feel exhausted by your efforts, the other brothers and sisters in your community will help with the work so you can take the time to restore yourself and continue. You must also have the courage to say no, or you will lose yourself very soon, and that will not profit the world. Learning to say no is difficult, but it is not impossible. You have to serve in a way that you can preserve yourself. Doctors, nurses, psychotherapists, and teachers have to do the same; they have to preserve themselves in order to last longer for the benefit of other people. To preserve yourself is to preserve the opportunity to serve others. Preserving yourself and your compassion is the answer. And that can be done easily within a community of practice.

Q. Our planet is threatened by global warming, extinction of species, and pollution in our rivers and oceans. What can we as Buddhists do to help save the Earth?

A. The first time astronauts took a picture of the Earth from space, millions of us were moved to see our home, the Earth, a living blue planet in a vast black cosmos. The planet Earth, so alive, abundant, and beautiful, is a real Pure Land, a true paradise, and yet we living beings do not know how to cherish and protect her. Instead we are destroying her. That is why we need the Buddha.

The Buddha is not a god; the Buddha is someone who has awakened, someone who knows what is going on. The Buddha is us. So the practice of the Dharma is to help us and the people around us to wake up to the fact that we have a beautiful planet that needs our protection.¹ That's why enlightenment, awakening, is very important. Every one of us has the seed of awakening in us, and that is why we are hopeful. With collective awakening, things can move quickly. So everything we do should be aimed at bringing about collective awakening.

The practice of the Dharma cannot be individual anymore. It should be a collective practice. Teachers should practice with other teachers and students; psychotherapists should practice with their clients and other therapists. Filmmakers should make films that inspire awakening. Journalists should write articles that help people to wake up. Everyone has to do the work of promoting awakening. Awakening is the foundation of every kind of change.

In order for the Buddha and the Dharma to be available, we have to build a Sangha, a community that practices awakening. The Sangha is our refuge. By taking refuge in the Sangha, we take refuge in the Buddha and the Dharma, and we feel safe. When we're mindful, when we're concentrated, when we practice awakening, we are the Buddha, and our Sangha is the Buddha. This is something we must recognize. If we can touch that truth, we will no longer be victims of despair. Despair is the worst thing that can happen to us. Collective awakening is our hope and the hope of our planet; and collective awakening is possible.

Q: What can we do when a person attacks us physically? May we use force in order to protect ourselves? Can a country use force to protect itself?

A: There are many things we can do to prevent ourselves from being attacked, physically or mentally. These things are part of how we live our daily lives. We learn to live in such a way that nobody wants to attack us. When you know how to generate the energy of brotherhood, of compassion, you'll be protected by the energy of compassion and understanding. By living with understanding and compassion, you will also have a lot of friends to protect you. This is the basic practice. That is why we shouldn't wait until there's an attack in order to learn how to react.

When the Buddha was a young man he was versed in martial arts. He knew that with his skill, he would be able to respond to a physical attack. Like the Buddha we can practice qigong and other nonviolent methods of protecting ourselves. We can eat and work and sleep in a way that we preserve our health and resilience. We can cultivate mindfulness, concentration, and compassion. Every time the Buddha was in danger of being attacked physically, he used his mindfulness, intelligence, and compassion to subdue the person who was about to attack him, and he didn't have to use his martial arts. Misunderstanding brings fear and anger, and we immediately think of the gun and the army as the only solution. But there are many nonviolent ways to protect our country and ourselves. Violence is the last resort. When a country is united, when it has wise leaders who practice deep dialogue and deep listening, the country has many friends and doesn't have to use its army a lot. Instead the soldiers spend their time repairing roads, building bridges, and helping communities.

Q. How can we help our leaders become better?

A. Our leaders have good seeds in them and they also have negative seeds. They may be surrounded by people who don't know how to water their good seeds and who continue to water their seeds of fear, anger, violence, and greed. That's why we have to find ways to get in touch with our political leaders and help them. Protesting is a kind of help, but it should be done skillfully, so it is seen as an act of love and not an act of hate.

Political and business leaders have a lot of energy and the desire to fulfill their wishes. Some of these desires may be very wholesome: the desire to stop pollution, bring an end to social inequality, restore peace, transform and bring change into the world. But that doesn't mean that they don't also have the desire to be powerful, successful, and famous. So there may be several conflicting desires in our leaders. We can help them to become aware of their motivations and see how to harmonize them. The way is to help them to understand themselves.

Our leaders generally believe that they understand themselves and the world, and that all they have to do is act. But that's not true. They haven't understood themselves enough. They haven't understood the world enough. This is a reality. None of us understands ourselves perfectly, none of us understands the world enough. It's good for a practitioner to be humble enough to recognize that she has to learn more about herself and more about the suffering and the situation of the world.

We can help our leaders not to be too sure of their understanding of themselves and of the world. You should be able to listen to them and to use loving speech in order to help them to make progress on the path of self-understanding and understanding the world situation. When they act, we want them to act in the context of a Sangha and be able to make use of collective insight.

The practice of listening deeply to oneself and understanding oneself well, of listening to the world and understanding its suffering is the same for everyone, whether they're individual practitioners, for political leaders, or business leaders. There are many business leaders who want to do good things, who want to use their companies to promote more social equality and well-being. But they're encountering a lot of difficulties. Some of them have to make compromises or they may lose their position and their career. Our leaders have their own difficulties. We can't simply blame them for the world's problems. We have to understand them before we can help them.

There are many ways of approaching leaders. All of us--carpenters, machinists, journalists, writers, filmmakers, educators, parents, lawyers, nurses--can write letters, make phone calls, carry signs. We can express ourselves in such a way as to bring about awareness and help with the transformation of our collective consciousness. This is the work at the base; transforming the way we think, helping all of us to see things more deeply and clearly. Every one of us can do this in our daily life. That will contribute greatly to the awakening of the world. Our political leaders and business leaders will profit. We have to speak to them. We have to shine light on them. But before that we have to shine light on ourselves.

Q. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was a leader with the ability and the knowledge to truly transform the world into a place of peace and cooperation. Will we ever have such a leader again?

A. Martin Luther King, Jr. is still here. There are among us more than one Dr. King; there is continuation. But we have to be very observant in order to be able to recognize his or her presence and offer our support and our help. Often, we feel that we need a leader outside of ourselves--a Buddha, a Gandhi, or a Martin Luther King, Jr.--to show the way. But we have the Buddha inside of us. We have Gandhi and King inside of us as well. We are interconnected. We don't need to wait for some other person to be the change we want to see in the world.

One of the ways we can help is to show the people who have a lot of money and guns that they can be truly happy. There are many people who are powerful and rich but who suffer very deeply. They believe that happiness isn't possible without money and power. That kind of thinking is at the very root of war and social injustice. If you can give those people a taste of true happiness they will be able to change their way of thinking. But you can't just change their thinking by talking. You have to do something else. You have to show that you are truly happy, even if you don't have a lot of money. According to the teaching of the Buddha, these people have the seed of enlightenment in them also. If we manage to touch that seed, they will abandon their way of thinking, and they will serve the cause of peace. In this way you yourself help the continuation of Martin Luther King, Jr. in the world.

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